

A 9/11 widower refuses to succumb to hate. Can the country do the same?

By Mitchell Zuckoff

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Jack Grandcolas, whose wife, Lauren Grandcolas, and unborn child died in the crash of Flight 93 on 9/11, stood on the coast near his California home, near where his wife's ashes were scattered. JAKUB MOSUR/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The 20th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor came and went with little fanfare.

A memorial service in Hawaii featured minor politicians, Gold Star mothers, and 108 New England survivors of the raid who flew from Boston to honor the dead. President John F. Kennedy told a union convention in Miami that the day was a reminder “that this nation is a leader, a teacher, and a doer of unsurpassable deeds.” Then he focused on foreign trade.

Editorial writers reflected on how much had changed — for the better — since the cataclysmic event that launched the United States into World War II.

“[A]s the first shock waves spread over America, it would have been hard for us to believe in the future that is now the present. It would have been hard for us to believe that those who were our enemies ... are now our friends. But so it is,” The New York Times editorialized on Dec. 7, 1961.

“The old hates are dead,” it continued. “We gain little by new hates. On this day of memories there is no value in resentments against whole peoples.”

The world was no paradise in 1961. The Cold War was in full swing, and the Berlin Wall had just risen. An ugly war was gaining steam in Southeast Asia, and domestic bliss in the United States was a privileged myth soon to be exploded by assassinations and civil rights struggles.

Yet something profound had changed over the previous 20 years: Although Pearl Harbor remained a deep wound in the national psyche, it had been allowed to heal.

What a difference from today, as we approach the 20th anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001 — day one of a war on terror that would not pause, much less end.

I’ve been living with 9/11 since the day itself, when I wrote the lead story about the attacks for this newspaper with help from numerous colleagues. Later, for a book, I spent years listening to, and sometimes crying with, hundreds of survivors, victims’ family members, heroic responders, military and government officials, witnesses, and others, many still scarred physically and emotionally.

I marvel at how so many of them have persevered and even thrived despite excruciating losses, among them one extraordinary man whose story I’ll tell shortly. Their resilience and grace are especially noteworthy considering the tortured state of the nation as we prepare to mark the day when terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners, two from Boston, and killed nearly 3,000 people.



A US flag was placed near Lauren Grancolas's name at the September 11 Memorial at Ground Zero last week in New York City. SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

Amid the torrent of memorial events and media spectacles, few warm sentiments will be heard about how far we've come. No one will credibly celebrate the death of old hates or the transformation of former enemies into friends. Instead, after nearly 20 years of war, Afghanistan has fallen back under the Taliban, the same repressive Islamist movement that shielded the Al Qaeda terrorist leaders who plotted 9/11.

The domestic scene is hardly better. Although nothing close to a 9/11-scale terrorist event has occurred in the United States, that doesn't mean Americans enjoy tranquility at home.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, surveys found what one pollster described as "extraordinary unity" among the American people and a strong tolerance for dissenting views and disparate religious beliefs. Both findings disappeared from poll results within two years.

A similar phenomenon was seen in attitudes toward Muslim Americans. In December 2001, a poll by the Pew Research Center found that public opinion of Muslim Americans had actually improved since the attacks. Conservative

Republicans led the way: Shortly after 9/11, nearly two-thirds expressed favorable views toward Muslims in the United States, up 29 percentage points from early 2001. That didn't last, either. A 2019 poll found that 71 percent of Republicans said they don't believe Islam is compatible with American values, compared to 42 percent overall.

New hates are flourishing, too, fueling “resentments against whole peoples.” That's true every time a virus is blamed on a nation or an ethnicity. It's also true when “enemy” is applied not only to hostile foreign governments and terrorist groups, but also to neighbors who express opposing political views, exercise their First Amendment rights, work for news organizations like this one, and differ on the existence of a pandemic and a warming planet.



A demonstrator unleashed a smoke grenade in front of the US Capitol during the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. ERIC LEE/BLOOMBERG

Everyone seems certain who's to blame, even if that certainty is itself subject to divisions. Pollsters say the nation is split on whether the responsible party wears a red hat or a tan suit. That gulf remains deep even after red hatters achieved what the thwarted hijackers of United Airlines Flight 93 couldn't on 9/11: visiting death and destruction on the US capital.

Solutions are complex and seemingly remote. But anniversaries are opportunities for reflection, and today it's worth considering lessons from one of the people who suffered most.

Individuals directly touched by 9/11 hold a range of political and personal beliefs, and none could presume to speak for all. Some have been ground down by grief. Some have died by their own hand or from 9/11-related disease. Some, like my friend Elaine Duch, who was horribly burned on the 88th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, live with constant reminders of the day.

And some, like a California man named Jack Grandcolas, have every right to feel rage, yet somehow they express the opposite.

I first met Jack in a men's room in New York City.

I tell the story that way because it's true, and also because it makes Jack laugh. The fact that he's able to laugh after all he's been through is a minor miracle, so it's worth making it happen at every opportunity.

The longer version is that we were both at a television studio in Manhattan early this summer to tape a special about 9/11. I was rushing to change into a suit while a middle-aged man with brown hair and a bemused look waited near the sinks to wash his hands. When Jack introduced himself, I grew flustered. Anyone immersed in 9/11 knows about Jack and his harrowing story, so I reached out to shake his unwashed hand. That was the first time I heard him laugh.

I called Jack several weeks ago to talk about the long road he's traveled from 9/11 and what he's learned about life, hate, and love.

Jack's journey began in the predawn darkness on Sept. 11, 2001, when the telephone didn't ring in the bedroom he normally shared with his wife, Lauren Catuzzi Grandcolas. The couple lived just north of San Francisco, and they'd turned off the ringer on their bedside phone to avoid being woken up by telemarketers who began calling at 9 a.m. East Coast time — 6 a.m. Pacific.

That day, Lauren was in New Jersey after attending her grandmother's funeral. So Jack was alone when he vaguely heard the downstairs phone ring and went back to sleep. It was Lauren, who left a message saying she'd arrived early at Newark International Airport and would catch a morning flight home: United Airlines Flight 93.

If Jack had answered the call, the news would have surprised him. In the 17 years since they'd met as undergraduates at the University of Texas, Jack had grown to admire and adore Lauren, but he'd never known her to reach an airport early.

At 38, petite and fit, with blue eyes and shoulder-length brown hair, Lauren had recently left a successful marketing career to write a book designed to help women achieve their dreams, which would be published as "You Can Do It!: The Merit Badge Handbook for Grown-Up Girls." She was adventurous and strong, a certified emergency medical technician, the daughter of a college football coach who'd inherited his drive.



Jack and Lauren Grandcolas. Part of the message she left on their answering machine as the plane was under attack said, "OK, well, I just wanted to tell you I love you." COURTESY FROM JACK GRANDCOLAS

Married to Jack for a decade, Lauren was three months pregnant with their first child.

When Flight 93 lifted off at 8:42 a.m. Eastern time, Jack was still asleep. Lauren was in seat 11D, one of only 44 passengers and crew members aboard the sparsely filled Boeing 757. Seated in first class rows 1, 3, and 6 were four members of Al Qaeda who intended to fly the plane into the US Capitol building or the White House.

As Flight 93's wheels rose, hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 from Boston was four minutes from plunging into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Two other cross-country flights, United Flight 175 from Boston and American Flight 77 from Dulles International Airport in Virginia, were minutes from being hijacked as well.

At 9:26 a.m., unaware of the other hijackings, the pilots of Flight 93 responded to a flight dispatcher's warning about the risk of cockpit intrusion. Before anyone on the ground could answer, the terrorists in first class broke into the cockpit. The hijackers used knives, violence, and threats to gain control, and they claimed they had a bomb.

Jack was still in bed.

Minutes later, the downstairs phone rang again, and again Jack cursed the pesky telemarketers and rolled over. For a second time, it was Lauren, this time calling from the cabin of the hijacked plane. Again the answering machine beeped and she left a message.

"Honey, are you there?"

She spoke clearly, calmly, offering no hint about the chaos around her. It's impossible to listen to the call and not speculate that Lauren didn't want to worry him.

"Jack? Pick up, sweetie." A pause. "OK, well, I just wanted to tell you I love you.

"We're having a little problem on the plane. Umm. I'm totally fine. Umm. I just love you more than anything, just know that. And, uh, you know ... I, I'm, you know, I'm not uncomfortable and I'm OK. For now. Umm. It's a little problem.

“So I’ll, a --.” Lauren hesitated there, then continued: “I, I just love you. Please tell my family I love them, too.

“Bye, honey.”

Lauren was one of 13 passengers and crew members who made 37 phone calls during the 35 minutes the flight remained aloft after the hijacking. Some described the terrorists and discussed a plan to try to regain control. After voting on their shared fate, the 40 men and women held hostage transformed from strangers into a strike team.

It’s not known exactly what role each one played, but Jack believes that Lauren was a leader.

“She would have helped motivate the passengers. She would have jumped in, tapping her wrist, saying they wouldn’t have much time,” Jack said. In her message he hears Lauren telling him, in his words: “There’s a problem but we’re going to try to fix it. We’re going to try to wrest this plane back and there’s a high degree of probability we won’t succeed.”

Flight 93’s cockpit voice recorder captured a pitched battle that ended when the terrorists, realizing that they would fail to reach Washington, D.C., crashed the jet into a field outside the tiny hamlet of Shanksville, Pa. No one survived. It was just after 7 a.m. Pacific time.



Emergency workers looked over the site where Flight 93 crashed near Shanksville, Pa., in 2001.
GARY TRAMONTINA/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jack awoke at almost that exact moment. As he dressed he saw televised images of both World Trade Center towers aflame, and then the burning Pentagon. He still thought Lauren was on a later flight, probably grounded, so his fear focused on his brother, an East Coast pilot for American Airlines.

He went downstairs and saw a flashing red light on the answering machine. The first message, about Lauren's flight change, worried him. The second one drove him to his knees.

Lauren's death and the loss of their unborn child sent Jack spiraling. In three months he lost more than 30 pounds from his 6-foot frame. Now Jack says he's completed "a 20-year Ph.D. on grief." But throughout that time, he refused to be consumed by hate.

"My initial reaction was anger, you know, 'How could this happen?'" Jack told me. "What I realized quickly was the perpetrators were gone, those that took

Lauren down on the plane. The second thing I realized was the ideology of hate is what caused them to do what they did.

“In our society, love must conquer hate. So I won’t go down the hate path,” he said. “I can disagree, I can dislike, but hate is a learned, very dangerous ideology.

“It never made sense to me how you could hate someone you don’t know. In fact, they may turn out to be your best friend.”

That’s one of the lessons Jack draws from the events on Flight 93.

“The individuals on that flight didn’t know each other either. They chose not to fight with each other but to bond together,” Jack said. “The people on that plane were representative of the melting pot — old, young, gay, straight, male, female. From all races. Mothers, fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, husbands, wives. Mothers to be.”

His voice trailed off for a moment.

“I believe — not to borrow someone else’s phrase — that’s the real way to make this nation great again. It’s about how we come together as strangers in a moment of dire need. And right now I think we’re in a moment of dire need.”

At that point I mentioned that the US death toll for the pandemic has already exceeded 200 times the loss of life on 9/11.

“It blows my mind. We were losing 9/11 numbers of people daily. If that happened and we could identify the shooter or the killers, this country would have come together immediately and went after them,” he said. “I wish we could be more united as a country and as a world, as we were after Sept. 11, 2001.”

When Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden a decade ago, Jack considered it a grave necessity, “a symbolic victory over the ideology of hatred.” The next victory he’s awaiting is the long-delayed trial of five accused 9/11 planners before a military court at Guantanamo Bay. Among them is Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the accused architect of what Al Qaeda called “The Planes Operation.”

Partial remains were identified for everyone on Flight 93, but it took Jack until 2016 to decide what to do with Lauren’s ashes. Over time, they hardened into

a block that Jack had to break apart with a utensil. In the process, he discovered three small objects he thought might be teeth.

On closer inspection Jack saw they were rivets from the plane, an experience not unlike the husband of a shooting victim finding bullets among his pregnant wife's ashes.



Lauren and Jack Grandcolas. For Jack, "Love must conquer hate. So I won't go down the hate path." COURTESY FROM JACK GRANDCOLAS

Still, he persevered. Jack spread the ashes on a California coastline they both loved.

Today, as he nears his 59th birthday, Jack talks about "chapters of closure," knowing that some days will be dark and the process will never be complete. His healing efforts have taken many forms. He endowed a maternity suite in Lauren's name. He prospered as a marketing executive. He met an empathetic woman named Sarah, and they married two years ago. He believes Lauren sent her. He coached golf at a high school during the years when their child would have been high school age. He's come to terms with not having children of his own: "We have cats instead of kids. You play the cards you've been dealt in life and do the best you can do."

Still, the universe wasn't quite through with Jack. Last year, he tripped and fell into a fire pit. He suffered third-degree burns on his back, endured a 33-day stay in an intensive care unit and survived a potentially fatal infection. Skin grafts from his legs were secured by 184 staples, causing agonizing pain with every movement. Now Jack golfs with the surgeon who cared for him. He jokes that one benefit is that he gets prescriptions for his swing as well as his back.

"I wear a shirt and, you know, you can't see the scars," Jack said.

"That sounds like a metaphor," I said.

He laughed, then said, "It's true. We all have something that happened to us that injured our brain or our body one way or another. We all tend to try to cover up that injury."

Jack is completing a book about grief and healing that he hopes will further destigmatize mental illness and post-traumatic stress, which he describes as "an injury," as in, PTSI, as opposed to a disorder, or PTSD. He calls the book a tribute to his lost child. It begins, "Dear Son ... Or Daughter, I'm writing this for you on the advice of my therapist." It's scheduled to be published next April, on what would have been their child's 20th birthday.



The sun glinted off the "Tower of Voices" Flight 93 National Memorial in Shanksville, Pa. ANGELA WEISS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Jack hasn't returned to the crash site since 2003, but next Saturday he plans to be in Shanksville. He wants to hear the memorial bells toll for Lauren and their child. He wants to spend time with Flight 93 family members and local residents who comforted him. He wants to see the completed Flight 93 National Memorial, which includes a recording of Lauren's second telephone message.

Jack hasn't heard it in some time, but then again, he listened to it more times than he can count. He knows every word, every pause. How she says she loves him three times. How she shields him from the horror around her. When Lauren stammers, Jack is certain he knows why. She normally would have said something like, "I'll talk to you later." But Lauren didn't want to make a false promise, one she might not keep. He hears the message as "a directive to go on."

In the early years Jack struggled with survivor's guilt for not answering the phone, but now he cherishes the enduring presence of Lauren's voice and her words.

“I had to figure out how it could be helpful, not hurtful,” he said. The answer, he found, is in the words themselves: “It’s a message of love. Love is much more powerful than hate.”

That was Lauren’s message and now it’s Jack’s. Before the next anniversary, or even before the next expression of a new or an old hatred, it should be heard.



White doves were released during a memorial service on Sept. 11, 2002, in Shanksville, Pa. TOM MIHALEK/AFP

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